

Narrator:

Marcela Echevarria is from Colombia. Even though her education was in history and literature, she has become a successful entrepreneur and created a unique company that succeeds not only as a business enterprise, but helps preserve cultural tradition. Marcela participated as a mentor in Pathways to Prosperity, a women entrepreneurs' conference in Washington on October 9th, 2009. She told us how she started her business and why relationships are such a key part of being a successful entrepreneur.

Marcela Echevarria:

I am in the business of embracing sustainability in the luxury market through finding artisans that have beautiful traditions, ancestral traditions, and finding markets for them from a showroom that we have in New York and, through their products, expressing their culture and keeping it alive.

I call what we do archeological design which is a combination because, you know, the artisanal world is very diverse. You have indigenous artisans, rural, and urban. Of course the indigenous art pieces that are ritual, that are one-of-a-kind, very special, very culturally rich and then with the urban and rural artisans, you can have more of a conversation, design-wise. But it always starts from their tradition, their know-how, and their spirit. You know, it's not like a manufacturing relationship — no. It's a conversation.

Basically I went to school here and studied history and literature, and I wanted to write. And I went back to Colombia after graduating in '95, and I wanted to write about things that the world is losing — traditions, food — so I reached out to the main editors and publishers and I said, "I have this idea, I want to really write about the gypsy who is doing this beautiful hand-hammered piece," and they looked at me like, "Wow — that's really strange." They didn't really pay much attention because it was a moment in the '90's where everything in South America wanted to be like America.

So I did that with several groups of artisans. If I heard of something interesting I would travel to that village, live with them for a while, interview them, like really from the publishing side of things. So then I was thinking, you know, if I'm really committed to the survival of these traditions, what if I tried to bring it to market. So then I also have a lot of experience in branding, and I thought what if I create a brand?

So I wrote four emails — info@donnakaran.com, info@ralphlauren.com — "Hi, my name is Marcella Echevarria and I have this idea; I think the exchange between talent, knowledge, and economic power between the North and the South should be balanced differently, and I have this idea called Su Revolution."

I actually believe very strongly in the principle of mentorship and the reason is because that's how the artisanal world operates. For example, what we have in Colombia, is we have a whole network of clusters led by master artisans who are mentoring ex-combatants of Colombia's peace process. And we have found that their relationship at the personal level — it's key. I mean, you're sharing, and you're partnering and also because it's a very lonely journey to be an entrepreneur, so I don't see it as me being a mentor. I'm actually so happy to be in a network and to share, to be able to discuss parts of the journey that just aren't possible to discuss with people who haven't tried it.

The people that I have met, the different levels of entrepreneurship that all share the same spirit — I think that is wonderful. To see that it doesn't matter if you're selling \$7 million, \$2 million, \$60,000 — there's still that same spark in your eyes that unites the whole group, so I think that's great.

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